

# An Animorph Fairy Tale(s)

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Category: Animorphs

Genre: Humor

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 1999-11-07 08:00:00

Updated: 1999-11-07 08:00:00

Packaged: 2016-04-27 09:48:15

Rating: K

Chapters: 1

Words: 8,428

Publisher: [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)

Summary: Hey, even I'm allowed to write a silly one, right? A fun read. Very little thinking required.

## An Animorph Fairy Tale(s)

> <meta name="Generator"> An Animorph Fairy Tale \_

I got this idea after reading Forlay's "The Perfect Fairy Tale?". Not the same, but I always give credit where credit is due, and I would never have written this if I hadn't read her fic. Enjoy!

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CHAPTER 1:

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Beginning with Cassie

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Hi. No boring normal stuff. You know the drill. It gets boring to repeat it.

Also, normal stuff doesn't apply here.

You know how it is.

Sometimes, there are things that can better than normal.

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It started, not in a construction site, but at the mall. Again.

The six of us were together - me, Jake, Marco, Rachel, even Tobias and Ax. We were just hanging out. It was one of those times in

between missions where we didn't care if we were seen together or not, where it was a simple matter of needing each other's company in a normal place. We were enjoying a simple dinner of burgers and cinnamon buns and milk shakes.

"We probably work all this off in other bodies, right?" Rachel said, sipping her milk shake.

Ax shook his head. He tried to say something, but he had his mouth filled with an entire cinnamon bun at the same time, so nobody heard what he said. We all nodded, as if we understood, though, just so he wouldn't try saying it again. We weren't in the mood to listen to anything negative.

"We deserve this," I told her firmly. "So what if we gain twenty pounds? It's twenty pounds we really, really, really deserve."

"Hey, we can't save the world if we can't run," Marco pointed out. "Do you know how hard it'd be to run from half the things we've faced with twenty extra pounds?"

"This won't add twenty pounds to any of us," Ax said, when he finally finished swallowing his sixth cinnamon bun. "Even if we were to lay down for the rest of the day, we would not gain nearly that much weight from this meal."

"So says the one that won't have to worry about a single calorie of it in an hour," Marco stage-whispered to me, winking. I giggled in spite of myself. It didn't matter that it wasn't all that funny. It felt good to goof off. To relax, if only for a few hours. It felt good to have Marco pretending to whisper a stupid joke to me, to watch Ax stuff himself sick on cinnamon buns, to listen to Rachel pretend - yes, pretend - to worry about her weight, and to pretend to take her seriously. It felt good to glance every once in a while at Jake and not see that serious, who-do-I-have-to-kill look on his face, even if he did have a huge glob of ketchup on his chin - and even if the ketchup had been there for almost ten minutes. It even felt good to have Tobias looking a little crazed, a blank expression on his face, staring at somebody until he realized he was staring, got embarrassed, and looked somewhere else, inevitably staring at someone else to start the cycle over again.

It felt good to be doing something normal.

\*

When we finished eating, we let Ax and Tobias go their own way, back to the woods. Since their houses were closer than mine, I went home with the others, since one of their parents was sure to give me a ride home. We joked around. Marco alternated between trading insults with Rachel and arguing with Jake about two superheroes I'd never heard of. At least, I think they were talking about superheroes. They might have been talking about two characters in a video game. I don't follow either of those things very closely.

I just followed along, enjoying being the mature one. Just as it'd been great to have a couple hours of normalcy, it was great to have a few minutes to watch the people I fought to save my planet with be normal.

Normal, I decided for the infinitieth time, is good.

We stopped at an intersection. Rachel pressed the cross signal button. "We should do this more often," she said, then punched the button four more times. "Come on, you stupid contraption, change! There isn't anything coming!"

"Beat up on crossing light buttons?" Marco asked, sounding confused.

"No, beating on you!" Rachel replied, and punched him four times in the arm.

Not hard, though. About as hard as she punched the button. Still, he pretended to cower. "Oh no! Oh no! Get her off! Get her off!" he wailed in a high voice.

Jake and I traded a glance. "They make me miss being young," I told him.

He nodded. "Yeah," he agreed. "Seeing Marco and Rachel beat each other up makes me miss the good old days, when Tom would give me noogies and mean it, and Mom and Dad would read fairy tales to me before I went to bed, and Tom would listen in and pretend he didn't like hearing them for the umpteenth time."

"Your parents read you fairy tales?" Marco pretended to choke on something. "And this stopped when? A month ago?"

Jake gave him a dirty look that was somehow friendly at the same time. "You can't tell me your mom and dad didn't read you stories," he said. "I mean, I remember some of them. Your mom used to make fun of how there was one Prince Charming and too many princesses, remember?"

Marco smiled. "Yeah," he said. "She'd always end it with something like, 'Of course, that was before she found out he was cheating on her with one-of-the-other-chicsâ€¦' but that is another story.'" He scowled, exaggerating it so much that his lower lip pushed his upper lip almost to his nose. "She never told us that other story, though."

"Maybe Charming was just a popular name in once upon a time," I suggested, smiling. "You know, like John."

"Charming Smith. Yeah, that'll work," Marco taunted me. The light changed. We headed across the crosswalk. "I'll have to remember to name my first born Charming, so he can strangle me on the way home from the hospital."

I'm not sure what happened next.

There was a screeching sound, and we all turned to look. I saw a flash of lights dart sideways, then forward. There was an inhuman scream. I smelled something burning. I saw my face, terrified, a reflection - and then I saw nothing at all.

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## CHAPTER 2:

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Moving on to Marco

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I was wearing tights.

"Oh no," I said, but there was no one there to hear me.

The room was awesome. It was big, it was warm, it had a heee-uge\_ bed, a great view out every enormous window, tapestries I couldn't pay for if I got a million bucks a month for allowance—we're talking seriously rich. We're not talking devil's food cake rich, we're talking devil's food cake \_mountain\_ rich.

And then some.

But none of that mattered, because \_I was wearing tights\_.

Frantically, I searched the entire room. It took about an hour or three - without a watch, I couldn't exactly \_check\_ - but, eventually, my worst fears were confirmed.

There wasn't a \_single pair of pants\_ in the \_entire\_ Superbowl Stadium-size room.

I fell onto the bed. A water bed. Very nice. Warm. Big enough for my entire gym class. I moaned in despair.

"I'm wearing tights," I groaned.

There was a loud creaking noise. "Get over it," a familiar voice said. "I don't think there's a pair of pants in this entire place - and trust me. It's big."

I looked up at Jake. I couldn't help but snicker. "Well, at least mine are dark blue," I said.

He looked down at his tights. "What's wrong with red?"

I shook my head. "Sorry, buddy. It's just not your color. I think you're more an eggplant sorta guy than cherry red."

I'm sorry. I had been kind of shocked to find myself dressed in - get this list:

- \* thick, dark blue pantyhose
- \* gray boots that came up to my ankles
- \* a dull blue top that came down to my thighs, one with wide sleeves that puffed up at the shoulders and tightened around my wrists, at which these lace frills were sewn (on the sleeve, not my wrist, thank God!). Lace also frilled at my neck, which itched like \_crazy\_—
- \* a wide gray belt that cinched my blue— shirt, for lack of a better term— tight at the waist.

It was a bit of a relief to see my best friend pretty much in the same getup, except his tights were sort of reddish-brown, his boots and belt tan, and his top a sort of brick red. His hair looked kind of funny, though. Then I realized - it was thicker, now, as if he hadn't had it cut in awhile. It was also longer, and tied in a prim ponytail at the base of his skull.

I slapped a hand at the back of my head. No ponytail - but my hair was long again, longer than it had been before. I felt it go down to my shoulderblades. "What's going on?" I asked Jake. He's the leader guy. He's supposed to know the answers to the important stuff, like "what's going on?"

He shrugged a little, flopping on the bed next to me. "I don't know," he admitted bluntly. "All I know is we're in this giant castle, wearing tights, looking like some wannabe Hansons, while everybody else in the castle moans about the first anniversary of the disappearance of Prince Tobias."

"Wait." I held up my hands in a "desist" position. "\_Prince Tobias\_?"

"Yup. It gets worse. You, my friend, are Prince Marco, while I am Crown Prince Jake."

"Crown Prince. Does that mean everybody gets to crown you when something goes wrong?" I lifted my fist, as if I was going to bash him on the head, but inside, I felt numb.

I have experienced stupidity. I have saved my own life by hiding aliens in horse stalls, becoming fat middle-aged men, exposing ancient androids, and protecting the secret of an alien toilet.

I used to think that that kind of stupidity meant I was insane.

Nope.

Now this was insanity.

"It means I'm the oldest," Jake replied calmly. "When our father dies, I become king, and you and Tobias get squat."

"You're so benevolent, bro."

"Shut up. I'm trying to be lighthearted."

"Jake, please. You're the leader. Don't go taking my position on the team. You don't want me in charge, do you?"

"That's true." He sighed, cringing. "These things are riding up on me."

"I didn't want to know that."

"Sorry."

"Just, please, don't mention it again." I sighed. "Okay. We're stuck as princes in someplace and sometime not in our usual time zone. We are suddenly brothers with Tobias and he's been gone for a year."

Well, at least we know two things."

"Which are?"

"Well, we know what happened to Tobiasâ€¦ and we've reached the point where we've spent too much time together. When you are pronounced brothers with your best friend, it proves that you have spent too much time together."

"So now what?" he asked me. "We go hunt for Tobias?"

"We know what happened - in our reality," I said. "This is definitely unreal. For all we know, he's a frog on a lily pad somewhere." I blew my hair out of my eyes. "For all we know, Ax, Rachel and Cassie are frogs on lily pads. For all we know, all four of them are lily pads."

"Marco."

"Hmm?"

"You're depressing me."

"Sorry."

"We have paid jesters here."

"So I'm not allowed to make jokes anymore?"

"God forbid."

"Let's get somethin' together, then go look for the others."

"Let's do it." I gave him a tolerant look. He shrugged a little. "Hey, she's my cousin."

"Wrong," I told him. "She's our cousin now."

"She's going to love that," he said, grinning.

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### CHAPTER 3:

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And what about Rachel?

"I hate this I hate this I hate this!\_"

Like a little kid, I stamped my foot. "Why aren't I allowed out?!" I demanded.

The little gnome-like guy cringed. I think he was a midget, but he had very real pointed ears. I had never seen a two-foot tall guy with foot-long pointed ears, and, frankly, he was somehow more unnerving than a Taxxon. Something about a grown man being two feet tall with ears half his size is just sickening.

I wanted out.

"Well, your highness-"

"And \_stop calling me that\_!" I snapped at him. "Just because I'm over five feet tall doesn't mean you have to make me feel like a mountain!" I looked disgustedly at the getup I was in.

Normally, I would have nothing against a beautiful, pale lavender silk gown that trailed gracefully to the floor and bared my shoulders, with sleeves that hugged my arms snugly all the way down to the wrists. I felt like I'd been poured into it, it felt so perfect. My hair was done up in some sort of complicated hairstyle, off my neck. I had velvet shoes that matched the dress perfectly, and felt like the coziest bedroom slippers.

I was also really, \_really\_ not in the mood for it at the moment.

But, for some reason, I couldn't morph.

That was why I hadn't thrown that annoying little man out the window yet. Though small, he was awful dirty. I didn't want to touch him without gloves, or a nice, thickly-furred bear paw.

The little man bowed. "Well, your majesty, I'm sorry, but m'lady forbids it."

"Wait a minute. Your \_what\_?"

"M'lady. The Madam."

"No. What'd you call me?"

He bowed, somehow not cracking his head into the stone floor. "Your royal and most beautiful majesty."

I held up my hands. "Ex\_cuse\_ me?"

"You are most pardoned, your majesty," he told me in his odd, high, scratchy voice. He had a voice like you might imagine a Chihuahua with a sore throat having. Extremely weird.

"Your majesty of what?" I asked blankly. I had missed something. I had most \_definitely\_ missed something!

"Your royal majesty, Princess Rachel the Sweet and Pure."

"Sweet and pure?" I echoed skeptically. He bowed again. "Would you \_stop\_ that? You're going to hit your head on the floor."

He fell on one knee. For a moment, I had the immense fear he was about to propose to me. "As I am your humble guardian, Ratskalian."

"Ra-" I started to repeat, then thought better of it. Didn't he mean Rumpelstiltskin? No, waitâ€¦ that story hadn't involved any princess locked in a tower in the middle of nowhere with some "The Madam" lady keeping her thereâ€¦ did it? I hadn't heard that story in a long time. "Ummâ€¦ could you maybe guard meâ€¦ on the \_other\_ side of the door, maybe? Please?" I was breathing through my mouth. There was

just something extremely wrong with that guy. Something that extended farther than his ears did.

He bent forward, even on one knee, to rest his head on the floor. "As you wish, your majesty," he said. He stood - which didn't change his height much - and left the room.

A moment later, I checked the door. Locked. "Figures," I muttered, scowling. I knocked on the door.

Ratskalian opened the door. "Yes, your majesty?"

"Cut the title crap and let me out."

"M'lady specified that you stay hereâ€¦" He paused, trying to think of something to call me, then gave up. "I cannot disobey The Madam."

"Well, if she said for me to stay here, then I disobey her by leaving, you don't," I told him firmly. I lifted up my skirts and tried to step over him.

Somehow he suddenly appeared taller. "Forgive me," he said, "but she also specified that I make certain you do not leave."

"Oh." I scowled. Obviously, there was more to this guy than his ears - er, than met the eye. Getting around him wasn't going to be easy, especially since I couldn't morph. I looked around the room for something to smack him in the head with. A couple vases caught my eye. I wandered over to one, picked it up as if to look at its design, then chucked it at him.

Ratskalian didn't even flinch when the big vase smashed right in his face. "If it suits you," he said, "you may smash the other vase against my face as well."

I stared at him. "No," I said finally. "No, I think one's enough. Go away."

He bowed, and closed the door behind him as he left.

I flopped on the high four-poster bed, and pouted. "I hate this," I muttered. I stood up again, and leaned against the sill of the one window. "I hate when I don't know what's going on, when I'm stuck in a tower eight hundred feet high with a troll blocking the one door and no wings."

I watched longingly as the birds of prey outside flew around on thermals. "Where are you?" I asked my friends.

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#### CHAPTER 4:

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Ax's Even Weirder Problem

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I was silent as the humans placed a heavy, sort of arch-shaped seat on my back, and buckled it underneath me. One forced my mouth open, and shoved a strange bar behind my dull teeth. That human then looped the strap of leather that connected to each end of that bar over my head. "The heir's mount is set!" the human shouted. Someone smacked my flank painfully. Taking that as a command to move forward, I did so, quickly. Beside me, another of my apparent species was treated similarly, except that one was brown with a black mane and tail, while I seemed to be extremely white, in all cases.

Somehow, without ever recalling morphing into one - or, in fact, acquiring this particular one - I had become a nothlit, trapped in the body of an extremely white, extremely large male horse.

A pair of young human males waited outside the horse shelter. Each had a primitive sort of weapon looped over one shoulder - bent wooden rods which kept their bowed shape thanks to strings of gut - and a container of the appropriate projectiles for those weapons on the other. The taller of the two humans gripped the leather strap that went around my head, stuck his foot in a foothold that hung by another leather strap from the seat on my back, and pulled himself up. "Practicing with Cassie is definitely a help," he said. He laughed as his companion had much more difficulty getting into the seat on the back of the other horse.

The first human's voice was familiar, but I couldn't place it. I flicked my ears. I wished my eyesight was better. Also, there was a very large protrusion from my forehead, which made my forward vision even worse than it normally would be. It was extremely annoying.

"There's probably some kind of unicorn spell on yours," the second human said. Like the first human, he had a very familiar voice. "Some kind of  
get-into-the-unicorn's-saddle-easy-to-make-Marco-look-like-an-idiot spell."

Marco? It didn't quite sound like him, butâ€¦

< Marco? > I said, looking at him. I couldn't see well, with my eyes on opposite sides of my large nose, and the protrusion in the middle of my field of vision.

The second human jumped. "Hey, Jake, I just heard Ax!"

"You did?"

I turned my head as far as I could, to look at the human on my back as best as I could with one eye. < Prince Jake? >

Marco snickered. "You can't tell him not to call you that," he said.

"Ax?" Prince Jake sounded surprised, but no more surprised than I was to have him sitting in a heavy seat strapped to my back. "How'd you get to be a unicorn?"

< Ah. Is that what I am? I had been wondering what this protrusion from my forehead was. It makes it more difficult to see than it is as a normal horse. >

"That makes me feel better," Marco said, finally managing to get into the seat strapped to the other horse. "Jake gets into a saddle easy, but his unicorn can see squat. This should be fun."

"Shuddup." Jake looked down at the seat - saddle - he was sitting in. "I'm not hurting you, am I?"

< No, my prince. > Marco snickered again. Prince Jake glared at him. < The saddle is somewhat uncomfortable, although this rod in my mouth is worse. However, I am in no pain. Just mild discomfort. >

"Uhâ€| yeah." Prince Jake patted my neck with his hand. "Thanks for the assurance, Ax."

< You are welcome. >

"Okay." Prince Jake sighed. "Okay, umâ€| could you walk forward? We're going to see if we can find the others."

"We're going to search every lily pad we come across," Marco told me.

< Why do you suspect they will be near water plants? >

"Don't ask," Prince Jake told me.

< All right, Prince Jake. > I started to walk forward. The other horse followed me.

Prince Jake shifted in the saddle. "Listen, Ax," he said. "So long as you're a unicorn, can you do something for me?"

< I am willing to do anything in my power, > I agreed.

"As long as you're a unicorn, you have to call Marco 'prince', too."

< But he is- >

"Humor me, Ax," Prince Jake said, chuckling. He shifted again. "Just humor me."

\*

Prince Jake rode my back for a long time. We traveled down a dirt road, which was flanked on either side by tall grasses - one side wheat, the other hay. "Hey, everything's okay!" Marco said at one point. "We're just in Cassie's backyard!"

< That was very humorous, Prince Marco, > I told him, speaking as Prince Jake had instructed me. It was the fourth time I had done so.

Marco looked at Prince Jake. "You know, I'm starting to see how that can be irritating. Isn't there some rule where unicorns can only talk to maidens? >

< Why should thought-speak be limited to females who have not had sexual intercourse? >

"It's a rule of unicorns, Ax. You're breaking it."

If I could have, I would have frowned. < The older humans in the stable seemed oblivious when I tried to speak to them, > I said, remembering. < Only one, a very young male, heard me. Perhaps I am limited to being heard by those who have not had sexual intercourse, although they do not necessarily need to be female. >

"Are you saying only virgins can hear your thought-speak now, Ax?" Marco asked me.

< Yes, Prince Marco. That is what I said. >

He sighed heavily. "Ax, are you sure you can't get out of that unicorn body?"

< Beside the fact that Prince Jake has now been riding me for almost four hours- >

"Why does everyone have to say the last thing I want to hear?" Prince Jake muttered. He sounded as if he was in pain. "If you thought what I said about these tights was bad, Marco, you don't even want to think about what I think this saddle is doing!"

"I feel your pain, Jake," Marco told him. "After all, I'm bouncing in a saddle in panty hose, too."

< Besides that aforementioned fact, > I continued, < I attempted to demorph earlier, without success. I must accept that this is what I am from now on. >

Although the words I spoke were calm, inside, I wished I could turn into a human, so that I might cry. Bad enough never to use my stalk eyes again—worse, to be trapped in a creature with such horrible sight as this! This was not like Tobias's body, which could fly, and had amazing vision. This body, instead, was heavy, flightless, and nearly blind. It seemed strangely illogical that I had not yet tripped on anything in the road, which I could barely see. My one comfort was that I still had four hooves. It was a small comfort, however, considering they functioned far different from my original hooves, and the fact that I only had a tail of hair, now, to replace my powerful Andalite tail. Still, I told myself, it could have been worse. I could have found myself trapped as a flea, or even an ant.

< How did we get here? > I asked the others.

"I haven't a clue," Marco said. "I don't even remember what I was doing before we got here. The first thing that clearly comes to mind is being in a room the size of Yankee's Stadium and being freaked out by the fact that I was wearing panty hose, then spending about three hours searching the whole thing for a nonexistent pair of pants."

"That's better than me," Prince Jake said. "The first thing I remember is being in an outhouse."

Marco cringed. "Jake, maybe everybody tells you stuff you don't want to hear because you do the same to them."

"Sorry." Prince Jake paused for a moment. "I went back inside, got generally lost, listened to some generally weird people moan about the missing Prince Tobias, and how fortunate the king is to have us as other heirs, though Tobias is the favorite - don't ask why, they just said he was - until finally I bribed somebody to tell me where you were by giving them my hat."

"Your hat?" Marco echoed.

Prince Jake shivered in the saddle. "Good riddance," was all he said.

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## CHAPTER 5:

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So where's Tobias, anyway?

—

I looked up at Cassie. < It's weird, > I said. < I'm the bird, but you're the one who can fit in a tree. >

"Yeah," she agreed, frowning a little. She crouched down on the branch she'd been standing on. "The weirder half of that is that you can't fit in a tree."

I forced myself to laugh. < You know, I'm having flashbacks to a certain race of egotists. >

Cassie giggled. "The Helmacrons?" She laughed. "Yeah, it is kind of similar, isn't it? Except we're both five feet tall, not an eighth of an inch."

Perhaps I should explain.

See, I was my natural, red-tail hawk selfâ€|

â€| but I was my natural, human size.

Not exactly the most natural combination.

It also made perching in trees extremely difficult, because I couldn't find enough space between branches.

"So you just sort of woke up in the woods that size, huh?" Cassie asked, sliding her feet out from beneath her to sit down.

< Probably just as you 'just sort of woke up' in the woods in that getup, huh? > You see, while I was Monster Hawk, Cassie was dressed in deerskin pants and a dark green, loose-fitting top with kind of sloppy sewing work, as if she'd made it herself. The collar was held shut with what looked sort of like a shoelace, which laced in three "x" crosses from the points of her collarbone down six inches. She kept having to retie it to keep from looking indecent, but it kept coming untied. Her shoes looked like sewn up squirrel skins. To complete the picture, she had one of those pointed green caps on her

head, like Peter Pan, including the red feather - but that feather looked like it had come from my tail, then put through the dryer on Extra Fluffy. It was huge, and bushy.

She rolled her eyes, then looked down at herself. She chuckled. "Yeah," she said. "Hi, MegaTobias. I'm Cassie Hood." She cringed, then shifted her bow off her shoulder. "This thing is cutting into my back." She left her quiver of arrows slung over her chest, though. I wasn't sure if she knew she was wearing it. She sighed. "So, what do we do? Wait for the Sheriff of Nottingham to come along and steal the tax money?"

< I'm hungry, > I said. < I'm hungry enough to eat a deer. At this size, I might \_have\_ to. > I looked down at my huge, Hork-Bajir-size talons. < I could squish a mouse under my foot without ever seeing it. >

"You go on," Cassie told me. "If you go, maybe you can see if any of the others are close by."

< How? > I asked bitterly. < If they're all dressed like you, it'll take infra-red to pick them out. You blend, except for that feather. >

"You can try," she said, shrugging a little. "It can't hurt."

< That's true, > I admitted. Getting off the ground was extremely difficult; the headwinds would have had to be hurricane force to give me any lift. Still, flying was shockingly easy, for a hawk my size. Much \_too\_ easy. I mean, how hollow could my bones be without breaking? I had to weigh fifty, sixty pounds, in the very least. I was Monster Hawk.

And I thought I was a freak of nature before!

Still, I managed to get enough altitude to cruise out of the forest, to a huge, open field with some sweet thermals that managed to lift even a dinosaur like me. I flew, higher and higher. In the distance, in two opposite directions, I could see two buildings: one was a lone tower, the other, a huge castle. < Weird, > I said to myself. < Where are we, Scotland? > The more open land was toward the tower; I floated in that direction, surfing the thermals that seemed much too strong for even the sun-baked field below. < It's been afternoon an awful long time, > I muttered to myself. It had. When Iâ€| 'just sort of woke up', as Cassie put itâ€| it had been late morning. At least ten hours had gone by. It should have been getting close to dusk, but it couldn't have been later than two in the afternoon.

Mentally, I shrugged. If proportion could be out of order, why not time, too? All I knew was, there didn't seem to be any danger, and I was starving. There wasn't anything to be seen bigger than a field mouse, though, and I didn't trust my huge talons to such small targets. I needed something bigger. A rabbit, maybe; that'd be a little smaller than catching a mouse on a normal day. I chuckled; catching a mountain lion would be like catching a rabbit. I chuckled, because a few mountain lions have thought of making \_me\_ dinner. I wondered if mountain lion tasted anything like chicken.

The tower came into clearer view as I surfed through the sky. It was a huge eyesore, like an enormous well someone had gotten carried away

with, then, suddenly realizing that it was way too big, carved out a rough window and slapped a silo roof on it, then ran as fast as they could. As far as I could tell, there weren't any doors - just the one narrow window.

As I watched, something pale purple passed in front of the window. There was someone in that fire hazard? Curious, I flew closer. The window was much bigger up close; it was about three feet wide and four high. I flapped as hard as I could, killing my speed, and landed, ducking my head so I didn't crack it against the top.

At the sound of my wings, the tower's single occupant whirled around, then screamed.

I stared, dazzled.

Her hair was like woven gold, braided and rebraided, woven and rewoven, into a delicate lattice of sunlight. Hidden within her golden hair was a small, equally delicate, equally golden tiara. Her eyes were wide and brown and beautiful, fiery and afraid at the same time. The lavender of her dress brought out the gold of her hair and brown of her eyes perfectly.

She was the most beautifulâ€¦ anythingâ€¦ I had ever seen, and ever will see.

Then the beautiful person spoke.

"What the heck?" she demanded. "First smelly short guys with big ears, now Big Bird's second cousin?"

< Rachel? >

She jerked, blinking in surprise. "Tobias?"

I tried to laugh. < That's MegaTobias - at least, according to Cassie. >

"All right - MegaTobias." She grinned for a moment. It almost knocked me off the windowsill, to plunge to a blissful death. Fortunately, the smile didn't last long enough to take full effect. Frowning again, she said, "You know where Cassie is? What about the others? Are they in on this too?"

< I don't know, > I replied. < All I know is that I'm having flashbacks to Helmacrons, along with a serious takeoff problem. Being this big is not exactly helpful. And I'm starving. >

"Can you demorph?"

< No. I'm stuck as MegaTobias. >

"Great. I can't morph, either. And there's this little gnome guy - Ratskalian - guarding the door. Smashing a vase right in his face didn't even get him to blink. Instead, it got him to ask if I wanted to smash another vase in his face. I'm stuck here."

< Not necessarily, > I said. Cautiously, so not to hit my head on anything or get wedged in the narrow window, I turned around. < Can you climb on my back? >

There was a pause before she answered. "That might just be crazy enough to work." I heard her feet move softly against the stone floor of the tower room. She climbed onto the sill behind me. I crouched down as far as I could. I felt her skirts against my tail. "Shoot!" she snapped. Then, "Sorry. This stupid skirt caught on one of your tail feathers. I almost fell off. Okay. I think I have the hang of these stupid things." With that said, I felt her arms go around my neck. She straddled my back. "I'm not in the way of your wings, am I?"

< I don't think so. >

"Okay. Let's get out of here!"

I leaped off the window sill, thankful to be able to spread my wings after being cramped in the narrow window. Still, it was hard to fly; Rachel added an extra hundred pounds to my weight. It wasn't that she was too heavy to carry; it was that she was heavy to fly with. I surfed the impossibly perfect thermals as long as I could, but we only got halfway across the field before I had to land and let her off.

She smiled at me. "Thank you, Tobias," she said. Gently, she kissed the side of my beak.

In a cloud, my feathers all fell off. < Wha- > I started to say, when my beak fell off, too, and my ability to use thought-speak died.

I looked at my wings; now, they were arms. I looked at myself.

I had gone from a five-foot-something-tall red-tail hawk, to a human dressed in a weird black shirt with poofy shoulders and silver highlights, black stockings, a heavy black belt, small black boots, and a sword in a black leather hilt.

"Wait a minute," Rachel said. I looked at her. "What just happened?"

"I haven't a clue," I replied truthfully.

"Maybe we should get back to Cassie."

"Maybe."

Too confused by the strangest demorphing I had ever been through, I walked through the field beside Rachel. Equally confused, she was as quiet as I was. It was going to take a lot longer to get back, on foot.

And, though I tried, I found myself still unable to morph.

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CHAPTER 6:

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Hmmm who have we missed?

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I hurt.

I hurt in the most unmentionable places.

I also hurt in most of the mentionable ones.

I have never - ever - ridden a horse - or anything similar to a horse - for six straight hours.

And I will never - under any circumstances! - do it again!

The four of us - me, Marco, Ax the unicorn, and Marco's thankfully silent horse - were now in a wooded area. With a moan, I slid out of the saddle. I almost fell over from a mix of sheer agony in some parts of me and eerie numbness in others. "We are not doing that again."

Marco slid out of his saddle, too. He did fall over. "Definitely not," he agreed, wincing.

< Before you sit down, Prince Jake- >

"I don't think I will be, Ax, but what?"

< I must ask that you do me the favor of removing the metal rod from my mouth. Not only is it very uncomfortable, but it has developed an extremely unpleasant taste. >

I sighed. "Sure, Ax," I replied. "Open wide." Obliging, the white unicorn who had, less than twenty-four hours earlier, been something even stranger, but more familiar - opened his mouth as wide as he could. I reached into his mouth, took hold of the rod that was lodged behind his teeth, and tugged it out. "Don't worry, Ax," I assured him. "You won't be needing this anymore." I threw it to the side.

< My thanks, Prince Jake. >

I sighed, suppressing the extreme urge to tell him not to call me that. For once, it was true - besides the fact that telling him to stop had never stopped him, anyway. All I'd get is a < Yes, Prince Jake, > or an < As you wish, Prince Jake, >, neither of which I was really in the mood for at the moment. In spite of what I'd just told Ax, I sat on the path, wincing as I did. I lay down and rolled on my side. That hurt a bit less. I groaned, putting my head in the dirt. "Kill me now, Marco," I muttered. "Kill me, before my aching butt and hideously positioned saddle sores do it."

"I can't kill you, Prince Jake. You're my brother!"

I rolled over to glare at him. "Then assassinate me, Prince Marco. You know you want to be king!"

"Don't roll in the dirt, Prince Jake," he said, smiling crookedly. "It is beneath your position as crown heir."

"Heir, or crown prince, Marco," I told him. "Don't mix the two."



"I meant to."

I sat up, cringing, then suffering from the pain in my butt. I brought my knees up, then crossed my arms and rested them on top of my knees. I rested my chin on top of my folded arms. "Is this where we get robbed and assassinated by highway thieves?" I asked no one in particular.

"How about this," a voice above me said. "You give me anything you have to eat and you can go right on nursing saddle sores. I am \_starving\_."

I stood up as quickly as I could without hurting myself worse, or falling over. A short figure dressed in green and beige dropped out of a tree. My face lit up. "Cassie!"

"Hey!" Marco cried. "Where'd you get pants?"

Cassie glanced at me, then him, then back again. Then she burst out giggling. "If you could see the two of you!" she snickered. "I wish I had a camera!"

"I wish we were in a time when cameras existed," Marco retorted, crossing his arms. "I mean, come on, Cassie, since when \_didn't\_ you dream of Jake being your Romeo in tights?"

Cassie flinched a little at that, and blushed. I'm pretty sure I blushed, too. "About time you two showed up," she said finally. "I was getting worried that it was just Tobias and me stuck here."

"Where's Tobias?" I asked.

"And it's us \_three\_," Marco corrected her. He chuckled a thumb at Ax.

Cassie glanced at the unicorn, not understanding.

< Hello, Cassie. I am the unicorn. >

Her eyes widened - then she burst out giggling again. "This is too great!" she laughed. She clamped her hands over her mouth for a moment before removing them again. "You guys looking like Shakespeare rejects, and Ax as a unicorn? What next - Tobias the Monster Hawk is just a stand-in for the frog prince?"

"Wellâ€¦" Marco glanced at me, a shadow of his smile crossing his face even as he tried to hide it. "â€¦ he \_is\_ a prince."

"He \_what\_?" Cassie demanded.

"All three of us are," I said. I looked at Marco. "Trust me, Cassie, I don't get it either. Too much is missing. Like, how'd we \_get\_ here?"

"See," Marco said, trying to explain, "we appeared in this castle, where Jake is the crown prince, and Tobias and I are his younger brothers - though how we could be younger and still about his age totally escapes me."

"Triplets?" Cassie suggested innocently.

Marco rolled his eyes. "Anyway, there's this whole thing in the castle with people moaning about 'Prince Tobias' disappearing a year ago, without a trace."

Cassie frowned. "He was just here," she said. "He should be back soon. He's looking for something big enough to eat."

"Big enough?" I echoed.

"Yeah," Cassie replied. "Tobias may be in his red-tail body, but he's got his human size. He's huge. Wait until you see. He's kind of scary. Marco, remember the Helmacrons?"

"Yes, I recall my time as a Micro Machine test driver," he replied.

"Remember what Tobias looked like?"

"Oh, boy. That again?"

"That again."

"Not anymore."

All four of us turned to look.

"Whoa," Marco breathed. "Rachel, have I ever told you I love you?"

Rachel rolled her eyes. "Don't start," she muttered. "I don't \_care\_ how it looks! \_You\_ try walking a hundred miles in this stupid skirt!" With a very unladylike grunt, she pulled the fragile golden tiara out of her hair. Immediately, the delicate weaving it had been shaped into fell apart.

And kept falling.

And kept falling.

Andâ€¦ keptâ€¦ fallingâ€¦

"Whoa," Marco said again. "Rachel, have I ever told you that you have a \_lot\_ of hair?"

Rachel frowned, looking back at the huge mound of gold hair that trailed even more on the ground than the hem of her lavender dress. "I didn't yesterday," she muttered. Under her breath, she mumbled, "I shouldn't have taken that outâ€¦" Then she scowled. "If I knew I had this much hair earlier, I could have made an escape rope and gotten out a \_lot\_ sooner!"

"Yes, Rachel," Marco said, nodding. "You could have easily made all the escape ropes you wanted, and still provide a wig shop for six years. By then, maybeâ€¦ perhapsâ€¦ you'd have your old hair back."

"Please shut up." She looked back at the puddle of hair behind her again. "How did so much hair weigh so little?" she muttered.

"How come you're not a hawk anymore?" Cassie asked Tobias, frowning.

"I kissed him," Rachel replied bluntly, before he could open his mouth. She crouched down. "Hey, Tobias, can I borrow that sword of yours? I think I need a haircut." Tobias unsheathed the sword at his hip and gave it to her. She began to hack away at her hair.

"Hey," Marco muttered, sounding hurt, "how come Tobias gets a sword and we get bows and arrows?"

I shrugged. "Must come with being the favorite prince."

Marco shook his head. "Guess you were right, Cassie." She looked at him, confused. "About Tobias."

"What about Tobias?" Rachel asked, looking up from hacking off her own hair.

"Cassie so nicely suggested, after finding out Jake and I had become trapped in leggings, and Ax in an albino horse with a horn glued to his head, that Tobias - a.k.a. 'Monster Hawk', I believe? - was a stand-in for the stereotypical frog prince."

"Frog? No," I said. "Prince?" I blew my bangs off my forehead. "Well, since half of us are princes anyway, why should it be surprising that Tobias is one of them?"

Tobias looked at me, then smiled faintly. "Last I looked, you were the only prince."

Marco threw a friendly arm over his shoulders. "Times change, bro," he told him, grinning.

Before anyone could say anything more, there was a sudden crack of green lightning, which just missed hitting Ax. He reared on his hind legs, startled. When the smoke cleared, an eerie, vaguely green-skinned woman in a dark, flowing cowl stood there, with an evil-looking, ornate staff in her seven-fingered hand.

"It can't be!" Cassie gasped.

I stared, too.

It was Maleficent.

Maleficent, the witch from Disney's Sleeping Beauty.

Except, for some strange reason, she had four, deer-like legs, a scorpion tail, and eyes on the tops of her pointed headdress.

"Great," Marco sighed. "We have Prince Charmings One, Two, and Three - Prince Charming number Three having been a hawk instead of a frog - the Andalite-Unicorn who only annoys virgins, Cassie Pan, and Ra-pun-chelâ€| and now, an Andalite dressed up as a Disney villain."

Tobias looked at Ax. "That's Ax?"

< Yes, Tobias, it is me, > he replied, in open thought-speak.

Tobias frowned. I guess the thought of Ax being a unicorn instead of his normal, if stranger, alien self disturbed him, too.

"He's awful quiet," Tobias muttered, glancing at Ax again.

Rachel didn't even look at him. She hacked away the last of the still ridiculously-long strands of hair short.

"How did you escape the tower?" Maleficent demanded in a strange voice, a voice like a spoken form of Visser Three's thought-speak. She - or was it he? - was addressing Rachel.

Rachel stood up, a scowl set on her face, Tobias's sword clenched in her right hand. Now, her hair hung in ragged clumps down to her shoulders. A pile of hair the size of a small haystack lay on the ground. "I hitched a lift," she retorted.

"You will return at once, and I will make sure you do not escape again!" Maleficent/Visser Three hissed. He/she whirled on Rachel, taking aim with his/her staff.

"No!" Cassie cried. She shoved Rachel out of the way, just as a beam of bright green light flashed from the staff. She felt limply on the ground, smoking slightly. Her cap fell off her head, the big bushy feather burned to a cinder.

Maleficent/Visser Three laughed a hideously evil laugh, one equal to any Visser Three has ever laughed. "Unless she receives the kiss of true love, within one minute she will be dead! May that teach you never to cross me!" With a flare of green light, he/she turned into a green-yellow ball of energy, which shrank until it disappeared.

"Jake!" Marco snapped at me.

Dazed, I looked at him. "Huh?"

Everyone was looking at me.

I looked down at Cassie. Was she even breathing?

"Don't just stand there!" Rachel snapped at me. She pointed the sword threateningly in my direction.

Snapping out of it, I hurried to Cassie's side and gently rolled her on her back. In spite of her singed clothes, she looked peaceful. Like she was asleep.

I started to lean toward her. Quietly, I whispered, "Cassie, I \_"

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CHAPTER 7:

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Don't worry, this is the last one.

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" - I think she's waking up!"

My eyes flew open. "What? what?" I said, dazed.

What had just happened?

"Cassie!" Rachel cried. She leaned against the metal railing on the right side of me. On my left, Jake leaned against a similar railing.

Why was I surrounded by railings?

I was lying down in what felt like a bed. My back ached. My head ached worse. "What happened?" I asked. My voice sounded scratchy, and kind of squeaky. Almost like what you might imagine a Chihuahua with a sore throat sounding like.

"Somebody lost control of their car," Jake replied quietly. "He nearly hit us in the crosswalk. He slammed on the brakes, but not quite in time. You got sideswiped."

"You took out his rearview mirror." Marco leaned against the railing at the foot of the bed. "How're you feeling, Cass?"

"Groggy," I replied. "And my throat is all dry."

"You've been out for almost fourteen hours," Rachel told me.

"For once, you didn't get hit by anything alien," Marco said, winking at me. "Just a rearview mirror."

I gingerly touched the back of my head, and winced. It was bandaged. "How did I?"

"Marco's kidding," Jake told me. "He's been doing a string of mirror jokes to help keep us awake - not that we needed help."

"You hit your head against the pavement when you were 'bumped', as the doctors have been saying it," Rachel added. "That guy is paying for your stay. Kinda nice guy, but a lousy driver."

"You've been with me the whole time?" I asked, kind of surprised, and kind of surprised at my surprise.

"We didn't tell Ax or Tobias," Jake said. "It's too dangerous. Knowing them, with something like this, they might overstay their welcome."

"Are you okay?" Rachel asked me, touching my arm gently.

I nodded slightly. I swallowed, trying to get my throat to feel a little better. Jake reached for the tray that went over the bed, and picked up a plastic water pitcher, then frowned. "Marco," he said, glaring at him. He threw the pitcher at him.

"Hey!" Marco fumbled the pitcher before catching it. "Man, you scared

me! I'm running on no sleep too, you know. Leave my poor weak heart in peace, before Cassie and I have to be roommates."

"You finished it, you refill it," Jake told him firmly. Marco rolled his eyes, but left with the pitcher.

"You're \_sure\_ you're okay?" Rachel asked me again.

I chuckled as best I could. "You're going to give me a headache if you keep asking me that," I told her. Then I grew serious. "None of you were hurt?"

Rachel shook her head. "Marco and I were clear. Jake had a close call, though."

Jake looked down. "Almost got my foot run over going back for you," he mumbled. He was probably trying to make it sound unimportant, but didn't quite do it. I let it slide.

Marco returned with the pitcher. He poured water into four of the little plastic cups on the tray. "So, let's celebrate normalcy, and how it can screw us just as easy as the insanity we live can. I'd've brought the keg, butâ€¦ well, you know. Boys like me can't pretend to be pregnant anymore. The doctors have gotten smarter."

I smiled as I took the cup Rachel handed me, but I found myself agreeing with Marco.

Sometimes, what's normal can be worse than what's not.

With all we live through, what we do isn't a freak accident. Sure, it's a freak accident that we can do something about it, but that's it. Beyond that, we have some, if only the tiniest, immeasurable amount, of control.

"So, Cassie," Marco said, once we'd all pretended to clink our flimsy plastic cups together, "you were out cold for fourteen straight hours. Before the doctors come rushing in - I told them to take their time, so they'll be sure to be here soon - did you have any interesting dreams you'd like to share?"

I smiled, then giggled. "Well, I had an interesting dream," I replied. Sipping the cool water made my throat feel better, even though the water tasted a little funny. I suddenly realized how hungry I was. "But I'm not sure I want to share it."

"And why not?" Rachel demanded. She was trying not to smile even as she crossed her arms in mock indignation.

"Wellâ€¦" I did my best to smile mysteriously. "For one thing, all of us were in it. And Ax, and Tobias."

"Ooh! Ooh!" Marco cried, looking ecstatic. "Was I Toto?"

I shook my head. Then, remembering Ax the "virgin-annoying" unicorn, I burst out laughing, even as a couple of doctors and my parents came in, and Jake, Rachel, and Marco were ushered out of the room.

I will just say here that I have nothing against Hanson, short people with big ears, Ax, unicorns, or anything else I may have inadvertently dissed in writing this. This is just to see how far I can take a stupid situation with our favorite characters taking it seriously.

—

End  
file.